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## In Search Of Alternative Moral Political Economies

By: A R Vasavi

*‘Development as Swaraj’ champions the untapped potential of the idea of swaraj as a different path to progress. Showcasing one example of a cooperative khadi unit, it criticises today’s development model. In essence, it speaks for a future built on local power and self-reliance.*

One of the pleasures of being a teacher is to see a young student grow, both as an intelligent and engaged person. Although I have not been Sumanas Koulagi’s teacher in a formal sense, I have interacted with him since he was 19 years old and was about to graduate as a science student in Mysuru. Reviewing his book, a revised version of a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Sussex, it is heartening to see him engage with complex ideas that could foster change in our society and economy.

The book is an account of the ideas and practice of *swaraj* (self-rule) as expounded by M.K. Gandhi and then by J.C. Kumarappa. Koulagi was bequeathed these ideas first by his grandfather, the late Surendra Koulagi (1934–2017), a stalwart of the Sarvodaya movement who also served as Jayprakash Narayan’s secretary, and then by his father, Santhosh Koulagi, both of whom did stellar work in Melukote, Karnataka, through the Janapada Trust. Koulagi has put this legacy to good use by setting up a cooperative khadi unit in Melukote.

The book is a competent assessment of *swaraj* and a proposal for recognising the potential of the idea as an alternative form of development. It is also a sharp critique of today’s dominant development model, and an account of an alternative model of production, as represented by the running of the khadi unit.

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Framing *swaraj* only as an alternative form of development is to limit its potential. As the author elaborates, *swaraj* can be seen as a “moral political economy” in which the links between “morality and materiality in shaping social order” and “re-establishing a lost connection between moral philosophy and political economy” are made possible. Locating *swaraj* within the larger framework of a moral political economy not only enables a very different pathway to human well-being but also shows a way to fully disregard and discard “development” and its many failed models.

Viewing *swaraj* as a broader idea will enable us to see its potential as a way to address the three big emergencies of our time. The first of these emergencies are the inequalities that mark most human societies. Today’s inequality not only leads to a skewed distribution of resources but also to an inability to ensure that the majority has access to good quality healthcare and education, which would enable them to take advantage of the opportunities they get.

The second emergency is that of democratic deficits in our public life, which has led to an erosion of democratic norms, processes, and institutions. This has given rise to authoritarianism in many forms, including electoral authoritarianism. The third emergency is that of climate change, which worsens the ecological degradation brought about by extractive and unsustainable economic practices.

The challenge for any alternative ideas, programmes, or policies is to be able to address these emergencies and to ensure that the structural features of inequality, authoritarianism, and ecological devastation will not be reproduced in them. In postulating *swaraj* as an alternative, Koulagi provides a succinct account of the limitations of Western-derived ideas of development that have now become dominant in much of the world’s economies and societies.

Countering the hegemonic “development” model, Koulagi mentions alternative endeavours such as Ubuntu, Buen Vivir, gross national happiness, and de-growth movements. Yet, for him, these have limitations because they have not been able to address the exploitative dimension built into them. The idea of *swaraj*, which focuses on “self-control,” “self-mastery,” and “freedom from desires,” offers both the subjective and inter-subjective possibility of building a non-exploitative, self-responsible, and sustainable pathway to economic, social, and political well-being.

Providing an example of the swaraj form of development in action, Koulagi presents the Janapada co-operative khadi unit in Karnataka. He sees it not only as an industry and livelihood but also as representing a social order that is non-violent, non-exploitative, and sustainable. Stressing the importance of an equitable and just social order over economic efficiency and profit, he questions the economic determinism that marks most policies today.

Although Koulagi does not elaborate on this, the possibility of the idea of swaraj as a moral political economy and as a guide post for assessing links between society and economics may be crucial to seeing it as an alternative to the neoclassical economic paradigms and theories that seek to fit all societies into hegemonic economic parameters. Such determinism has severely eroded the inner strength and harmony of plural and diverse societies.

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It would be pertinent to postulate swaraj as an overarching concept and ideal with its unique elements, criteria or processes, which can be extended to suit the needs of different societies and nations.

Koulagi pertinently criticises the khadi industry run by the state, highlighting how bureaucracy, inefficiency, exploitation, mismanagement, and hierarchy have been its results. This khadi industry is far from being a true symbol of swaraj because it is largely a state-run production model.

He details the running of the Janapada khadi unit at Melukote, which has emerged as an alternative to the dominant economic model and as an endeavour to bridge the divide between the urban and rural, and agriculture and industry. As a collective, the Janapada khadi unit privileges workers and the local community over competition and efficiency. It sees work as a way to self-realisation, which also provides an income, and emphasises that production has to prioritise sustainability over profit.

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Yet, even in this altruistic endeavour, caste rears its ugly head, and Koulagi acknowledges it persists amongst the khadi workers. Such culturally prescribed norms have become internalised axioms, which are difficult to challenge or question. The challenge then is to figure out how swaraj as a moral political economy can direct its energy to eradicating caste as a practice among those in its ambit.

Missing from the account of the Janapada khadi unit are details on how working capital is mobilised in the absence of government funds to pay all the staff and workers. Assured capital and a stable market are the two factors that determine the life of most production units. It would have been enlightening to know more about how these are maintained in the functioning of the Janapada khadi unit.

Koulagi elaborates on how drawing on the principles of swaraj has enabled the Janapada khadi unit to focus on non-alienation and a simple standard of living. It also understands decentralisation of power and production, and the need to manage the unit as a co-operative. The swaraj model of production has the potential of addressing the great divides and tensions that capital-based production reinforces: such as the division between the individual and the collective, and the division between the private and public domains.

The book points to the possibilities of swaraj as a prototype for new forms of production relations and as a base for a larger moral political economy. The Soviet experiment failed to address the human and individual spirit in production and the larger political economy, and China's model places the state and capital over individual freedom and rights. At the same time, crises all over the world testify to the failure of US-dominated capitalism. Therefore, the possibility of swaraj as an alternative principle for the 21st century needs to be considered.

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It would be inadequate to assert that a conventional Gandhian or Kumarappa model of swaraj could be the blueprint for such an alternative model. Instead, drawing on the lessons learnt by the swaraj experiment, new parameters of social justice, economic stability,

and ecological sustainability will have to be considered, in all production and governance relations. There will have to be a restoration of human-nature relations, and a welcoming of valid knowledge systems from varied domains and people. The parameters and criteria required to assess and monitor such endeavours will undergo a radical change.

In concluding his book, Koulagi notes, quite accurately, “Today, all over the world, most of the nation-states are striving to attain the glorious final stage of high mass consumption society as proposed by American economist Walt Whitman Rostow through the mantra of economic growth under the disguise of sustainable development.” This dominant paradigm has led to a focus on consumption, centralised power, and exploitative relationships. He goes on to recommend that the principles of swaraj, which emphasise the morality of the greatest good, decentralisation of power relations, and self-sufficiency in material relations, be considered an alternative to the Rostowian dictums of capitalist production. He points out that such an alternative moral political economy will provide guidelines to new forms of economic relations and new forms of social, moral and political order. These are so needed in our world, Koulagi says, to achieve a “non-violent global social order and in turn world peace.”

*A.R. Vasavi, a social anthropologist, is with the Punarchith (re-think) Collective and is based in Karnataka.*